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FM AMEMBASSY BRIDGETOWN
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC 3459
RUEAHLH/HOMELAND SECURITY CENTER WASHDC
INFO RUCNCOM/CARIB COLLECTIVE
RUEHCV/AMEMBASSY CARACAS 1517
RUMIAAA/HQ USSOUTHCOM J2 MIAMI FL
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STATE FOR S/GAC, OES/IHA AND WHA/CAR
STATE PASS TO USAID
HHS FOR CDC-WSTEIGER
SOUTHCOM ALSO FOR POLAD

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SUBJECT: BRIDGETOWN HOSTS SUCCESSFUL 2006 REGIONAL CHIEFS OF
MISSION CONFERENCE ON HIV/AIDS

¶1. On September 26-27, Embassy Bridgetown hosted the Fifth Regional Chiefs of Mission Conference on HIV/AIDS. The conference brought together U.S. ambassadors and officials from ten embassies, as well as representatives from Washington and the Caribbean region. The conference reviewed the progress made over the past five years, and focused on strategies to sustain the momentum and overcome the remaining challenges in the region.

RECENT PROGRESS

¶2. Conference participants from all sectors recognized the significant progress achieved in the last five years in combating HIV/AIDS in the Caribbean. The region and donors, both bilateral and multilateral, have increased resources to support the region's fight against HIV/AIDS. According to Ambassador Mark Dybul, the Global AIDS Coordinator, the United States provided USD 250 million in bilateral HIV/AIDS assistance to the Caribbean during the period 2004-2006. In addition, the United States remains the largest donor to the Global Fund to Fight AIDS, Tuberculosis, and Malaria, providing 30 percent of all contributions.

¶3. Improved regional cooperation in the fight against HIV/AIDS is another factor in the region's progress. Both Barbados' Minister of State in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Foreign Trade, the Hon. Kerrie Symmonds and Carl Browne, Director of the Pan-Caribbean Partnership Against HIV/AIDS (PANCAP), highlighted PANCAP as the principal vehicle for regional coordination on HIV/AIDS. They noted PANCAP's success in fostering cooperation, strengthening the region's training and education focused on HIV/AIDS, and mobilizing resources to support programs. In the last five years, PANCAP has evolved into a pan-Caribbean coordinating mechanism with over 70 members from a variety of sectors. Other regions are now looking at PANCAP as a possible model for their efforts.

¶4. In an overview of U.S. programs in the region, U.S. Ambassadors and other participants described a number of innovative programs designed to break down prejudices, reach wider audiences, and provide assistance to the most vulnerable. Skits, song and verse competitions, plays, radio dramas, walk-a-thons, quilt projects, and billboard campaigns are only few of the projects our embassies have supported through the Ambassador's Small Grants Program in an effort to turn the tide against HIV/AIDS.

REMAINING CHALLENGES

15. While the region has made significant advances in the fight against HIV/AIDS, the Caribbean continues to have the second highest HIV/AIDS prevalence rate in the world, after sub-Saharan Africa. As Minister Symmonds noted during his address, HIV/AIDS continues to kill more than 100 people per day in the region. Other conference participants painted a similarly grim picture: In Barbados, HIV/AIDS is the leading cause of death for the 15 to 40 year-old age group. In Jamaica, it is the second leading killer overall and the leading cause of death for children aged 1 to 4. In Haiti, 14 HIV-positive children are born each day. HIV/AIDS has also created a "tidal wave of orphans" around the world.

16. The devastating human costs of this disease also have broader implications. Minister Symmonds called HIV/AIDS a national security threat. Other conference participants noted the threat posed by HIV/AIDS to the region's economies. The region's small, mainly island-based economies are already more vulnerable to external shocks such as natural disasters or changes in the global economic outlook. HIV/AIDS further threatens to undermine their economic stability by holding the potential of devastating their work forces. Furthermore, with the region's increasing integration, borders have become more porous and populations more mobile, making the containment of HIV/AIDS increasingly difficult.

17. Another challenge that continues to plague the region is the stigma and discrimination associated with HIV/AIDS. While awareness of HIV/AIDS has risen throughout the Caribbean, stigmatization and discrimination against people living with HIV/AIDS continue to hamper the region's efforts. For example, Brenda La Grange Johnson, the U.S. Ambassador to Jamaica, noted that a recent survey of Jamaican companies found that 13 percent of them would not hire applicants infected by HIV. Dr. Carol Jacobs, Chairman of the Global Fund to Fight AIDS, Tuberculosis, and Malaria, provided another startling statistic: 40 percent of Barbadians would be

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unwilling to tell their partner if they were infected with HIV, and only 10 percent of Barbadians are willing to be tested.

18. Conference participants discussed several other challenges hampering the region's efforts against HIV/AIDS, including the lack of focus on prevention, inadequate infrastructure, brain drain, and unreliable data. The lack of human resources and technical capacity has also been manifest in the areas of crisis management and strategic planning.

MAINTAINING THE MOMENTUM

19. All participants agreed that the key to continued progress against HIV/AIDS was sustained public attention to this issue. CDC's Dr. Lisa Fitzpatrick urged the Ambassadors and other mission staff to work with her to ensure that the First Lady's proposal for an International AIDS Testing Day becomes a reality and a success in the region. A number of Ambassadors agreed to be publicly tested and to seek high-level participation from the governments to which they are accredited. Conference participants also agreed that enhanced public diplomacy efforts should be coupled, where appropriate, with quiet, behind-the-scenes advocacy and engagement with local political leaders, NGOs, and the private sector. Another new resource in the area of public affairs is the Caribbean Broadcast Media Partnership on HIV/AIDS, which was launched in May 2006. The Partnership's Chairman, Dr. Allyson Leacock, reported on the organization's goals and commitments, including member broadcasters' current commitment to program as much as 30 seconds per hour of free HIV/AIDS-related messaging. Dr. Leacock also discussed a number of innovative approaches for raising awareness among wider audiences, especially youth, by working with DJ's and celebrities, using "product-placement" strategies, and embedding HIV/AIDS-related messages in video games.

10. Improving coordination among governments, donors, NGOs, and the private sector will continue to be important. With increasing labor mobility and 40 million tourists visiting the region every year, the Caribbean must continue its efforts to pool resources and harmonize information. As the region prepares for the Cricket World Cup,

which will take place in March and April 2007, this coordination will become even more critical. To assist the region in its coordination efforts, the participants discussed creating matrices summarizing available resources, including human resources, throughout the region. Other suggestions included involving universities, specifically law schools and public health schools, in pursuing technical, legal, and statistical research and thus overcoming the governments' lack of qualified personnel. To maximize the USG's "bang for the buck" and avoid duplication, U.S. missions could catalogue the resources developed through U.S. government funding, such as radio dramas, plays, and commercials, and share them across the region. Creating a chatroom and/or a listserv may also foster greater coordination of U.S. strategies and resources.

¶11. Another area where U.S. Ambassadors and missions can play an important role is in seeking high-level engagement from Caribbean governments on HIV/AIDS issues. Conference participants agreed that overcoming the discrimination and stigma associated with HIV/AIDS must start with the countries' leaders, who can set an example and include awareness programs in legislation and education. In this regard, Dr. Jacobs applauded the initiative of Barbados' Prime Minister Owen Arthur, who moved the HIV/AIDS portfolio from the Ministry of Health to his office to ensure that HIV/AIDS work received central focus from his government. In addition, he tasked each ministry with establishing an HIV/AIDS sectoral plan to ensure that the fight against HIV/AIDS was a priority for the entire government of Barbados.

TOWARD 2010 AND BEYOND

¶12. While the challenge of HIV/AIDS remains daunting, the discussions during the conference showed that the efforts of the region, the United States and other donors, as well as the NGOs and the private sector, have already yielded positive results over the past five years. As we look toward 2010 and beyond, the U.S. ambassadors and their missions in the Caribbean should seek to lock in these gains, move beyond pilot projects toward sustainable and sustained programs, and continue on the path of progress.

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